

[Irving Fajans]

1938-9 New York

Swenson

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Living Folklore

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Feb. 1, 1939

(Collected from members of Department Store Workers Union, 1250.)

Irving Fajans, of 112 East 19th Street, who has been a Department Store worker for over five years, greeted me with the smiling courtesy which has become habitual with him in dealing with customers. Asked if the enforced rule of politeness to all comers did not desert him in after-work hours, he replied:

"Oh, no Miss! I guess it's got to be natural for me to act polite. You see the first thing a counter man learns is to keep his personal thoughts and opinions to himself. Whatever [we?] we may think of a customer is out of earshot.... Some of them make extreme demands on a fellow's patience, though. Like the time I was behind the cigar counter and a woman holding a squirming brat asked me for a 3 cent stamp, and then asked me to hold the kid while she fished for the pennies in her [purse?] purse."

Mr. Fajans has made his own classification of customers:

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1. The customer who enters the store periodically to buy the same article at the same price — such as socks or handkerchiefs. This type, you always know what he's going to ask for before he tells you.
2. The kind who tells you she knows exactly what she wants, and then takes two hours to make up her mind.
3. The type that's in a hurry— has to make a train, or has an appointment, and then dawdles around, hums and haws over everything you show her, finally walking out without buying.
4. The type who will slip in just before the closing bell rings and teka up the salesman's time after hours— of course very apologetic about it.

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5. The type who is purchasing an article for someone else, without knowing size, age, or sometimes, sex.
6. The 'Match It' type. She'll come in with a smudge of lipstick on a piece of paper, for instance, and want you to match it exactly in the article.
7. The type who tells you she has seen the same thing in another store at a much lower price— but buys from you just the same.
8. The customer who will place C.O.D. order for a large amount. Sometimes hundreds of dollars, to impress the clerk, and then the merchandise is returned next day.
9. Another type anxious to impress you, is the woman who buys some cheap article like washcloths, say, for 11 cents a piece, and then explains that she is choosing the inexpensive cloths because she is "Buying for my maid."

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Mr. Fajans has been employed in several of New York's chief department stores, including Macy's in New York, May's in Brooklyn, Ohrbachs, [?] Hearns, and various Woolworth and Grand Stores. He helped organize unions in all these stores, and has participated in many strikes and sit-downs. He remembers the famous March 1937 strike staged by Grand employees throughout New York City, which lasted for eleven days....

The leaders kept the hour of the strike secret until the last minute, so that news of it would not leak out to the management. The management had refused to negotiate with our committee, and the workers had voted for a sit-in as a demand for shorter working hours and better working [conditions?].

At 11:30 a.m. on March 14, the whistle were blown in every Grand store in New York, and the workers each finished their sales and folded their arms. Refusing to wait on any more customers. Practically 100 percent of the workers joined us, and most of the stores almost immediately closed their doors. We were prepared to stay in for a month if necessary.

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Arrangements had been made for food and bedding to be brought in, and the workers notified q their families by phone that they would be away from home indefinitely. We had cots brought in and blankets, electric burners for coffee, and plenty of eats. Although there was food and other things we might have used in the store, none of our people touched any sort of merchandise during the strike. Two engagements were announced during the time we sat in, and we held parties. We even held a marriage ceremony there for a couple who decided to get married during the strike. The girls dressed up the bride, and the fellows groomed the groom, and we had a priest sent for, and married them.

It was pretty cold, being early spring, and the blankets we had were not enough, so we had to huddle together at nights.

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Some of the fellows slept on the counters. There were some canary cages in the store, and we kept the birds fed...They'd trill and wake us up early in the morning. We had games like checkers and cards, and we had a radio, and danced to the music.

The strike held out over Easter week, and it happened that some of our people were Italians and Irish Catholics; so since they couldn't attend services, we held Easter services for them in the store.

Nobody left the store, except the Committee to contact the management, for eleven days. The girls held out just as well as the fellows, and everyone tried to be gay and have as good a time as possible. Luckily, no one in our store got sick during strike. The management finally heard our Committee and met our demands— largely as a result of the publicity our sit-down had gotten all over the country.....

Another strike that got a lot of publicity was the May Department Store in Brooklyn, there the girls got up on the elevator structure and shouted that the boss was unfair. On Lincoln's birthday, one of the 4 boys dressed up an Abraham Lincoln was parading on the picket line. A policeman came up to him and said, 'I don't know who this Abe is, but anyhow you're under arrest!'

During the Ohrbach strike a couple of years ago, two salesgirls pulled a neat stunt that resulted in the granting of our demands. There was a dinner being held for Mr. Ohrbach at the Hotel Astor, at which he spoke. Now Ohrbach is supposed to be a big philanthropist, contributes to a lot of charities and such. Well, when he was spouting about some of these public charity funds, two girls who had crashed the dinner by coming in borrowed evening gowns, climbed up on the balcony and chained themselves to the railing. Nobody had noticed them, and suddenly they began shouting in the middle of Ohrbach's speech: 'Charity begins at home! Give your employees shorter hours and better pay!' Of course, there was a big hubbub, and the girls were arrested. But the papers carried a big story, and the boss had to grant our demands to appease public opinion.'

From Miss Clarene Michaelson, organizer for local 1250 of the Department Store Workers Union, obtained two poems written by Department Store workers. She grants permission to print them. A SHOP GIRL'S SAGA

By

Betty Mindling, (of Norton's Department Store) A SALESGIRL'S LIFE IS NOT SO HOT, EVEN IN THE BETTER DEPT. SHOP. DEPOSITED EACH MORNING FROM THE SUBWAY CROP, TO WADE IN THE PUBLIC AUCTION LOT. WITH A SMILE, WE STAND AIMED TO PLEASE, NO MATTER HOW FEET ACHE AND PAIN: THOUGH SELECTED CLIENTELE COME TO TEASE, THE SHOW MUST [??] THERE ARE SALES TO GAIN. THEN THERE ARE THOSE LADIES OF LEISURE, WHO ALWAYS DALLY, WAY AFTER AFTER THE CLOSING BELL: TO SERVE— WE ASSURE THEM IS REALLY A PLEASURE: THOUGH WE WOULD AS LIEF TELL THEM TO GO TO H—. IF IN MANNER WE RIVAL THE HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR, AND PUT ON THE ACT TO CLOSE A DEAL, IT'S THE UNWRITTEN LAW— BY POPULAR GLAMOUR TO SEASON ALL SALES WITH A DASH OF SEX APPEAL. THE RUN ON THE STOCK IS SIMPLY TERRIFIC, TO KEEP IT APPEALING IS QUITE A DAY'S WORK: SUMMED UP, OUR WORK MUST BE PROLIFIC, TO TOTAL THE DEGREES OF DEPT. STORE CLERK.